

The Church in the New Testament

Today, more than ever, we have to ask ourselves, “Why are there so many different churches and denominations?” when the New Testament makes no mention of Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Calvinist, Baptist, Adventist, Pentecostal (and many more) churches. In order to gain a satisfactory answer to this question, the first and most important thing to know is how the church was understood in the New Testament and what the church should be like according to God’s will.

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⚓ 1 The Term “Church”

The Old Testament “church” or congregation was the assembly of the chosen people of God. In Deuteronomy 7:6-8 we read:

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

God chose the descendants of Abraham, who put his faith and trust in the only God, as his nation. They were to be a nation which was distinct from other nations, separated from all idolatry and from everything impure and unholy in God’s sight. With great patience he led his nation, sending them judges and prophets who constantly called them to repentance and obedience. He bore them until the fulfillment of time when he sent the Messiah, the Servant of God, whose task it was to carry the light to the ends of the earth (i.e. to the Gentiles):

And now the LORD says, he who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel might be gathered to him—for I am honoured in the eyes of the LORD, and my God has become my strength—he says: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may

reach to the end of the earth." (*Isaiah 49:5-6*)

The first Christians witnessed the fulfilment of this prophecy. They understood themselves to be the new nation of God, consisting of people from among the Jews and the Gentiles who Jesus led together bringing them into fellowship with himself and with the Father. Jesus himself spoke of this:

And I have other sheep [*Gentiles*] that are not of this fold [*Jews*]. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be *one* flock, *one* shepherd. (*John 10:16*)

The usual Greek word used in the New Testament for church is ekklesia. It is derived from ek-kaleo which means "to call out" or "to choose someone from among others".[1]

God wants to call every person into eternal fellowship with himself. This call went out to people through Jesus. Those who accepted him as the promised saviour and wanted to follow in his footsteps formed and continue to constitute the church, the fellowship of believers who have been chosen and called out of the world.

The members of the church are all those who God calls "into his own kingdom and glory" (1 Thessalonians 2:12), who through the gospel "obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thessalonians 2:14). Peter describes them as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

These words demonstrate how conscious Peter and Paul and their brothers in faith were of the high calling bestowed on all people who, by following Jesus become children of God, thus forming his nation, the church.

✠ 2 What are the Distinguishing Marks of the Church?

And he (*the Father*) put all things under his (*Jesus*) feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (*Ephesians 1:22-23*)

In the New Testament we read of the church as the body of Christ. Because God became man in Jesus Christ and the church is his body, its characteristics reflect God's nature. Just as he is holy, so also should the church be holy. Just as he is one, so also is the church unique and united. Just as he is love, so also is the church built on love. Just as God is the source of the truth, so also is the church the pillar and buttress of the truth and is obliged to hold on to the teaching delivered once for all by the apostles.

The scripture also says that God is light (1 John 1:5). In the same way the church should also be the light of the world, a city on a hill, whose light cannot be hidden from people, as Jesus told his disciples:

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. [...] In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (*Matthew 5:14,16*)

The church is the visible testimony of the grace of God which sets people free to love and deeply unites for eternity all who humbly entrust their lives completely to him. Now let us examine the various points in more detail.

📌 2.1 The Church is Holy

Peter writes:

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." (1 Peter 1:14-16)

These words explain what the Christians understood by being holy: one's old life, ruled by passions, is laid aside; a new life of obedience to God's will begins. The holiness of the church results from the desire of each Christian to be obedient. The aim of Jesus' own giving of himself was to purify and sanctify the church, as Paul writes in Ephesians 5:25-27:

... as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

God's intense concern for the holiness of the church and the grave responsibility which is connected with building the church are expressed in 1 Corinthians 3:16-17:

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you [2] are that temple.

Thus it is the responsibility of the church to make sure that every individual member wants to live for God's honour. This takes place first and foremost through brotherly love, the day to day mutual help and devotion, the fellowship and the deep connectedness which results:

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today", that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. (Hebrews 3:12-13)

If a person nevertheless wants to cling to his sins, he destroys the basis for being together, because he proves that his life is no longer determined by love for God and for the brothers and sisters. Jesus gave the church the responsibility in such a case to discontinue the fellowship so that the person concerned does not completely harden himself in sin, but comes to his senses and repents:

If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. (Matthew 18:15-17, NASB)

If the church makes such a decision in agreement with the will of God, the aim is that church should remain church; for if sin is tolerated, it spreads like yeast. Paul warns us of this in 1 Corinthians 5:6:

Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?

It is not an expression of mercy but of indifference if the church does not exclude a sinner who does not want to repent while they stand by and watch as he distances himself more and more from God. We would surely remove a rotten apple from the basket of apples “mercilessly” in order to prevent the other apples from becoming rotten.

Hebrews 12:14–15 also warns of the negative influence of sin in the church:

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled;

God wants a pure nation, which, motivated by his grace, is zealous for good works, thus giving glory to its Lord and Saviour, and waiting for his return...

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. (*Titus 2:11–14*)

See also: [Repentance](#) and [Sanctification](#)

⚓ 2.2 The Unity of Believers in the Church

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. (*John 17:20–23*)

This excerpt from Jesus’ prayer makes it very clear how important unity was for him, not only among the apostles but also among all who would become Christians through them. This passage also shows us how this unity can be achieved: He lets us partake in his relationship with the Father. In this way, being led by his spirit, we are able to recognize the will of God in the various questions concerning our faith and life. The condition is that every believer is gladly willing to submit himself in everything to God. For the church to survive, every member has to constantly pursue this aim.

The New Testament letters also appeal to the believers to be in unity, e.g. 1 Corinthians 1:10.

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and

the same judgement.

The language Paul uses here makes it clear that unity should not be limited to the very basic issues of the Christian doctrine, e.g. the belief that Jesus is the saviour. The spirit-worked unity should run all the way through the life and doctrines of the Christians in every point, as Ephesians 4:1–6 expresses:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Among Christians the unity of the Spirit is presupposed and ought to be maintained. This unity was and is a reality already here on earth; how else could it be a sign for the world?

Each Christians' repentance led him to a fundamental change of attitude; his life is no longer directed by the flesh, that is the selfish, sinful wishes, but by God's spirit who shows us the will of God. He is the one who creates this unity. However, when this unity is not present among people who call themselves Christians, it is also a sign...

There is also a growth in unity, which is visible from the verses in Ephesians 4:11–14:

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

The unity which all should attain to is not something that will only become reality in heaven. The point being made is much rather that young Christians need instruction for their spiritual growth. That is why Jesus gave the church gifts which should equip the believers for their ministry. It is especially important that they become firm in the right teaching, so that they can see through and refute false teachings, thus attaining unity with all other Christians.

See also: [The Unity of all Christians](#)

⚓ 2.3 The Love Among Christians

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (*John 13:34–35*)

Jesus stressed the importance of love among Christians. They will be recognized as his disciples if they follow his example of love.

It is important to be aware of what that means practically. The distinguishing marks of a Christian are not powerful sermons, miracles, exorcisms etc. If anyone wants to assure himself that he belongs to Jesus because of such things, he should remember the following words of Jesus:

On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And then will I declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."
(*Matthew 7:22-23*)

Whoever is not ready to lay down his life for his brothers and sisters is not a disciple of Jesus, because brotherly love is a feature of every person who has received salvation. It is a fruit of the self-sacrificial love Jesus had for us, as John writes:

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.
(*1. John 3:14-16*)

Certainly Jesus' sacrificial love is demonstrated most clearly by his readiness to die on the cross. But it also includes his whole life and ministry. Throughout the duration of his ministry he was always available for his disciples and the people who wanted to listen to him.

The Gospel of Mark reports an event which gives us insight into his readiness to lay down his life:

And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things. (*Mark 6:31-34*)

The disciples experienced how selflessly Jesus loved; they saw that he set no limits on his devotion, but was in every way focussed on the salvation of people. Following this example of devotion, the Christians began after Pentecost to share their lives together, putting brotherly love into practice in their daily lives. For a more detailed description of this you can read the first couple of chapters of the book of Acts, or our article about [The Life of the First Christians](#).

What we see in today's so-called churches falls a long way short of this life of devotion. Where people's readiness to have "fellowship" is limited to attending church events and a few common leisure activities, the word "love" cannot be applied. John clearly says, "Whoever does not love abides in death." He also says:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. (*1 John 4:7-8*)

See also: [God is Love](#) and [Are Christians Allowed to Judge?](#)

📌 2.4 The Church is Visible

A wide spread view in religious circles is the false doctrine of the “invisible church”. Put briefly, this teaching claims that within the various religious organizations there are a number of scattered Christians, or “true” believers. They make up the invisible church which Jesus will gather together in heaven as a visible church only when he returns. It is supposed that there will never be a “perfect church” on this earth.

From the New Testament we can see that the church was and should be a visible testimony for the world. Perfection was not the issue. At that time there were various problems and challenges the church had to face with God’s help, strength and leading. Nevertheless, the church was not a mixture of a few “born again” believers and many nominal Christians. In Acts 2:44–47 we read:

And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

It also says:

Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon’s Portico. None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women... (*Acts 5:12–14*)

To “believe in the Lord” at was not about being baptized as a baby, attending church “services” on Sunday and more or less adhering to Christian values. It meant changing one’s life and convictions profoundly in accordance with the teaching of Jesus, which is outwardly clearly visible. People who did not share this conviction did not dare to join the church.

Paul also confirms that there should be a clear difference and border between Christians and everyone else...

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, “I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.” (*2 Corinthians 6:14–18*)

The church is a beacon of hope for everyone who seeks and loves God. It will only remain so if there is a clear separation between light and darkness, right and false doctrine, faith and religiosity, obedience and

playing down sin etc. That is why Paul encourages Christians to separate themselves and to touch no unclean thing, so that God can be their Father.

This includes the readiness to separate from people who want to cling to sins in spite of all the help they received from God and the church.

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.” (1 Corinthians 5:9-13)

We cannot and should not leave this world. At school or at work etc. we are surrounded by people who do not share our faith and for whom God is of no importance. We should be a light for them (Matthew 5:14-16). From our words and actions they should be able to recognize who our Lord is and what he is like.

But it is not possible for a person who wants to live in sin or hold to unbiblical teachings to remain in the church long-term because the church should be able to be distinguished from everything else that is in the world. It should be recognizable as the place where everything is determined by the love and gratitude to God, and to which God can lead every person who is seeking him and the truth.

See also: [The Visible Church](#)

⚓ 2.5 The Apostolicity of the Church

... built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. (Ephesians 2:20-21)

What we mean by the apostolicity of the church is that the church, in its teaching and life, holds faithfully to the teaching and example of the Apostles, which we know from the New Testament. Jesus entrusted his teachings to the Apostles, his disciples. It is from them that we have received the apostolic tradition, the teaching of Christ. It has been recorded in the New Testament and we must clearly reject everything that deviates from it.

Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works. (2 John 9-11)

Concerning the first church we read that the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42). At that time the Christians were aware that the apostles were the ones who had received authority from Jesus to proclaim his teaching to the world, as he said:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have

commanded you. (*Matthew 28:19-20*)

The apostles fulfilled this commission, making disciples of people who were then able to call other people to become disciples. The great commission is valid for all Christians, but the apostles laid the foundation for this by passing on the teaching of Jesus which, in contrast to all other Christians, they received directly from him.

Paul, who is counted among the apostles in the Bible, also went to great extents to ensure that the original apostolic teaching is preserved. He wrote to Timothy that faithful people should hand on what they heard:

You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. (*2 Timothy 2:1-2*)

The letter to the Galatians also shows how clearly he condemns every deviation from the Gospel which the Christians received from the apostles:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. (*Galatians 1:6-8*)

These words are just as relevant today as they were 2000 years ago. What was proclaimed as the true doctrine back then remains the true doctrine today as well. For just as God does not change, neither does the truth change. If the church is the pillar and buttress of the truth (1 Timothy 3:15), its role in proclaiming and preserving the truth is very significant. For this reason we must vie with great fervour to hold onto the apostolic teaching that was once for all delivered to the saints. Jude encourages us to do this:

Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. (*Jude 3*)

We still want to briefly address the claim to so-called 'apostolic succession' made by the Roman Catholic Church. It claims that the Roman Bishop (the Pope) as the head of the Roman Catholic Church is the direct successor of the Apostle Peter himself, who was supposedly the first Roman bishop, through an unbroken chain of bishops.

The Catholic church historian Brox writes about this in his book *Kirchengeschichte des Altertums* (Church History in Antiquity):

Finally, concerning the tradition of a chain of Roman Bishops linking back to Peter, there is a list of their names (in Irenaus, Adv. Haereses III 3:3), but it was only compiled in the late 2nd century and is based on theological considerations, not on historical research. [3]

It is not on the base of dubious succession lists that we are within the apostolic tradition, but only when the content of our faith is in agreement with the teaching of the Bible.

⚓ 2.6 The Church is Catholic (Universal)

The term 'catholic' is not found in the writings of the New Testament. But because both the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed use this technical term, we too would like to deal with this frequently mentioned feature of the church.

The church has been described as 'catholic' since the early 2nd century. This word stems from the Greek *katholike* and means 'generally valid' or 'universal'. This corresponds to Jesus' words in Matthew 28:18-20:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

All nations are called to observe all the words of Jesus. At the "apostles' council" James also spoke about a "people from among the nations" (Acts 15:14).

Because the church consists of people who have received a new life through Jesus, what Paul expresses in Colossians 3:11 and Galatians 3:28 is the reality in the church:

Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. (*Colossians 3:11*)

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (*Galatians 3:28*)

Just as Christ is all, and in all, this 'catholic' church also is one. At all times from the time of the Apostles till the return of the Lord, in all places from Jerusalem to the remotest corner of the globe, the church believes in the same doctrine and lives the same love everywhere and always.

This is also in agreement with Vincent of Lérins' (died before AD 450) well-known definition of the term 'catholic':

Moreover, in the Catholic Church itself, all possible care must be taken, that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all. For that is truly and in the strictest sense "Catholic". (Commonitorium 2)

If a group which calls itself a church has teachings which have not been believed everywhere, always, and by all, i.e. doctrines which the church did not hold from the beginning, this group is not catholic according to this definition, even if it bears this title in its official name.

The universality of the church is not secured through a world-wide hierarchical system, but through the relationship of each individual relationship with God, who contributes to building Jesus' Church through the leading of the Holy Spirit.

⚓ 3 Summary

From the New Testament we can see how the first Christians understood and lived out church. The church was not an organization founded by men and held together by a hierarchy; it was not a place where people

were invited to visit an event. The clear distinguishing features of the church are the love among Christians, the pursuit of deep unity, the common struggle for holiness and holding fast to the teachings of the Apostles.

God became man in Jesus in order to open our eyes to see how we stand before him, to see how much he wants us to turn to him so that he can forgive us our guilt and give us eternal life. The love, unity and holiness of the church are a foretaste of heaven. They are the fruit of the willingness of every individual Christian to devote his life to serving God and allowing God's Spirit to work in his life.

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Footnotes

1. We are aware that we cannot derive too much from the etymology of the word "ekklesia" alone, because this word is also used for a normal assembly of citizens of a city (cf. Acts 19:40). Nevertheless, the aspect of being called out of the world is stressed in several New Testament passages, e.g. Acts 2:40; Philippians 2:15.
2. the Greek is plural
3. Norbert Brox: Kirchengeschichte des Altertums; Düsseldorf 3rd Edition, 1989, p. 106

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